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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000523

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [PHUM](#) [FJ](#)
SUBJECT: FIJI: DEPOSED PM QARASE'S POLITICAL VISION

REF: A. SUVA 501

[1](#)B. SUVA 518

[1](#)C. SUVA 522

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) During a lunch on Nov. 6, deposed PM Qarase sketched two scenarios he is prepared to offer interim PM Bainimarama in order to end Fiji's political impasse. Both would involve reconvening Parliament, at least for a few days. Qarase admitted that neither is likely to appeal to Bainimarama, who is "one of a kind, a unique individual." Qarase said he wants to hew as closely as possible to constitutional processes; but he indicated a willingness, if necessary, to consider Bainimarama's People's Charter and/or an amnesty and/or changes to the race-influenced electoral system. Qarase has recently raised with other COMs questions of asylum and possible funding of a trip to Europe and the U.S. With us, he asked if the Carter Center, or something like it, might be available to help facilitate political negotiations in Fiji. We expressed willingness to inquire about American facilitators when the timing is right, while noting that both sides need to be amenable if negotiations are to succeed. We also urged Qarase to hold to the "rule of law" in any offers, since the alternative is a very slippery slope. End summary.

Lunch with Qarase and Baba

[1](#)2. (U) Deposed Fiji Prime Minister Lai Qarase and his SDL Party colleague Tupeni Baba lunched with the Ambassador and DCM on Nov. 6. Qarase had phoned last week requesting a meeting. A quiet lunch seemed appropriate. (Note: Baba has a varied political past. For years he was prominent in the Fiji Labor Party. He became Deputy PM and Foreign Minister in the Chaudhry Government in 1999, after Chaudhry allegedly reneged on a commitment that Baba could be PM if Labor won. The Chaudhry-Baba relationship chilled, and after the 2000 coup, Baba became an academic in New Zealand. He came back to run in the 2006 elections under the SDL banner and lost, but was appointed to the Senate. He now is a close advisor of Qarase.)

Move to establish dialogue with Bainimarama

[1](#)3. (C) Qarase's only luncheon agenda appeared to be to sketch in bare-bones terms his negotiation strategy if interim PM Bainimarama eventually shows willingness to talk. Prior to last month's Pacific Islands Forum, Qarase wrote to Bainimarama suggesting they discuss a way out of Fiji's post-coup predicament. After the Forum, Parmesh Chand,

PermSec in the PM's office, wrote back expressing interest. Qarase wrote again to follow up, but the only response from the PM's office has been that ground rules would need to be established first. When we noted Bainimarama recently told the press Qarase had kept him waiting for seven years so Qarase could now wait for a while, Qarase dryly described Bainimarama as "one of a kind, a unique individual." Qarase claimed to have always been ready to talk, but Bainimarama was the problem. That included in early 2006 when then-VP Madraiwiwi attempted to broker discussions between the two. Bainimarama ended the arrangement after two sessions, complaining it was a waste of his time.

Qarase has proposed options

14. (C) Still, Qarase sees a need to discuss political options with Bainimarama. The SDL Party wants a solution that adheres "as close as possible" to the Constitution. First option would be for Bainimarama to permit the previous SDL Government to return to power. Qarase noted that is not at all likely. Second option is to agree on a scenario that Parliament would reconvene for a week or so in late 2008, during which it could pass critically important bills if necessary. Then Qarase would dissolve Parliament and call new elections. A caretaker government would sit in the meantime. Qarase stated flatly that he would not accept the caretaker role this time around. (He took that role in 2000.) Constitutionally mandated timing could be sequenced to ensure the elections take place in March 2009. Qarase didn't sound very hopeful that Bainimarama would find option two attractive either.

All issues on the table

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15. (C) Nonetheless, Qarase said, the SDL is willing to discuss all sorts of issues (including approaches that don't neatly fit within the current Constitution). He noted that the Party has clearly rejected both "amnesty" and "the People's Charter," but even those topics can be on the table if discussing them could take Fiji toward a resolution of its impasse. Similarly, the SDL is willing to consider instituting a "common roll" electoral system, something Bainimarama has advocated publicly in recent weeks. We emphasized the importance of a constitutional approach, since deviating from "rule of law" is a slippery slope.

Qarase with other diplomats: asylum? trips?

16. (C) In a recent conversation with the Australian High Commissioner, Qarase asked about the prospect of some sort of asylum at the Australian compound if things get really bad. The response reportedly was to urge Qarase to develop other contingency plans. (Note: Qarase told us he had heard Nov. 5 he was on the list of those to be arrested for allegedly participating in an assassination plot; but a very reliable source had later informed him that his name is no longer on the list (ref C).) With the EU, Qarase sought funding for an SDL delegation to visit Europe and the United States early in the new year to educate Fiji's diaspora and, presumably, raise funds. Trips to Australia and New Zealand are also on the drawing board.

Query to USG: possible facilitator of talks?

17. (C) At our lunch, the only distinct query was whether an American organization like the Carter Center might be available to facilitate a Qarase-Bainimarama dialogue. We proposed that the critical first step is for both sides to be ready to talk seriously about a negotiated solution, something we have yet to sense from Bainimarama, at least not yet. If conditions ripen, we said we would gladly pursue a request to make inquiries in the U.S., with the Carter Center or others. We also noted the East West Center's continuing willingness, when the time is right, to facilitate a

"talanoa" dialogue among Fiji leaders, as took place after the 2000 coup.

Comment

18. (C) When Qarase met with EU COMs on Nov. 5, he reportedly was extremely distracted by the "assassination plot" news. By noon on Nov. 6, he had relaxed again. As best we could tell, his primary intention was to probe for U.S. views regarding his negotiation strategy with Bainimarama. Per above, we urged staying on the high road, adhering to "rule of law" standards. Past post-coup negotiations in Fiji that offered up amnesties outside of legal processes ended up encouraging the military leadership's "coup culture" with the result that Fiji's political and economic stability have suffered greatly.
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